

Jeremiah 30: 31-34
John 12: 20-33
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
March 22, 2015

As we stand on the brink of the most important week for Christians we are presented once again with the greatest spiritual danger that there is: the danger of familiarity. Jesus will enter Jerusalem. The people will wave palm branches and throw cloaks on the road to honor the King. He will celebrate the Passover with his disciples, be betrayed by Judas, be arrested, convicted of claiming to be God, and fomenting revolution, killed on the cross, buried in a tomb and rise from the dead. I hope I haven't ruined the story for you.

The danger of familiarity so easily becomes the danger of believing that nothing new can come from the events narrated in the Gospels. It dulls our perceptions, bleeds out the colors. We become people who attend an annual parade because that's what we do. We hope for some clever new float. But it is the usual procession with pretty much the same participants. We go home and make lunch.

Part of the difficulty in keeping the events of Holy Week fresh is the idea that Jesus already knows what is going to happen. Jesus sensed the overall path his life would take. Jesus knew that his role in life was to fulfill the promise of God to Israel to inaugurate, a new covenant as announced by the prophet Jeremiah. He felt in the depths of his soul that the vast majority of the people in his time and place would misunderstand and twist his message to their own desires. He suspected that, in the end those who were hostile and threatened by his message would seek his death. He ached with the awareness that his strongest supporters

would become disillusioned. They would join in unholy coalition with Jesus' enemies to bring his ministry to a tragic and violent end.

In the midst of this heaviness, Jesus trusted a deeper promise from his heavenly father that there would be life on the other side of the pain and horror. As a human being he certainly hoped that this was true for himself. But what led him to submit to the betrayal, brutality and rejection was this deep deep trust: the life on the other side of his agony would come to all humanity. His own death he could accept. But the idea that his dying would be in vain, touch no heart, bring no new life was terrifying.

All this is true. Yet it is *not* true that Jesus foresaw every event that was to happen. He had not read the story to the end. He sensed the overall direction; but he was always open to surprise. For the week that we will celebrate there was no script. The crowds were free agents. The disciples had no idea what was to happen. The leaders of the Jewish people and the Romans were nervous but had no idea what was to come. It is easy once the story was over to see everything as predetermined and inevitable. But at the time no one, including Jesus knew exactly what was to happen. There was room for surprise, such as the episode which John relates this morning.

On the day in question, Palm Sunday has already happened. Jesus is in Jerusalem. The city is jam packed with pilgrims from all over the world who have come to celebrate the Passover. Jesus and his followers are but one of a multitude of groups of people pressing into the city. It is quite possible that the vast majority were completely ignorant of Jesus. It is quite possible that many would go home unaware of his death and resurrection.

John tells us that some Greeks have come to Jerusalem hoping to meet Jesus. After asking person after person they are directed to Phillip, one of the disciples. He leads them to Jesus. And this is the important point. Jesus is surprised. Having heard this story all of our lives, it sounds like part of the script. It sounds like Jesus has been biding his time waiting for this sign of what is to come.

The standard interpretation of this encounter is that these Greeks are Gentiles, non-Jews who represent the larger world Jesus has come to redeem. The Greeks have been waiting off stage to make their cameo appearance, fulfill their role and disappear from the stage. When the play is reviewed they will not be mentioned.

But what if they are not expected? What if their appearance comes as a genuine and welcome surprise? Imagine Jesus in the midst of all of the hubbub and excitement where there are unpredictable and crazy things happening all the time? Who are these Greeks anyway? Are they on a spiritual pilgrimage? Has the word of Jesus traveled across the Mediterranean Sea to Greece and awakened a desire in these people to brave great danger and uncertainty to look for this man? Are they like the wise men of old following a star, a dream, a vision a hope? Have they left comfortable jobs in Athens to seek this man? Or are they suffering from some grave illness, or hopeless and come to Jesus as a last resort?

What would cause you to leave where you are to brave a risky journey, massive crowds with no idea of who you were looking for save some stories that are burned into your heart? *What are the stories that continue to seek Jesus and week after week to worship him and follow in his path?*

To borrow a phrase from MJ, what a “plop experience” it would be to make this precarious journey to Jesus only to have him turn it into a pronouncement about himself. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” I refuse to accept this scenario! I trust that John chooses to quote these words of Jesus because they highlight his larger purpose to lead a new generation to faith.

But, John, with all due respect, you could not have known that we would be reading this story *two thousand years later!* We are numbed by the annual recitation of these events! We try to make a big deal about Holy Week and Easter. Our preachers, God bless ‘em try to make the scripture come alive. But to be deadly honest it doesn’t work. We are confronted year after year with events that seem so momentous but which in fact don’t reach us—at least, they don’t reach us the way we think they should or hope they would.” Meanwhile, John the rest of our culture is becoming more and more worldly wise and indifferent to this message.

Couldn’t you have included a bit about Jesus amazed joy when the Greeks, led by Phillip stumble into your presence just to see you? Are you not moved? Are you not filled with awe and humility? Is this not a massive affirmation of your message? In the midst of the darkness that hangs over your life do not these people from a foreign land give you the courage to continue your road to the cross?

Well, friends, maybe it didn’t happen that way. But wouldn’t the story come more alive if it did? Wouldn’t it be good news to know that every sacrificial move we make toward Jesus gives him joy? Every decision we make to follow him and to carry his story in our lives lets him know he matters to us? Would this thought—that we are the Greeks come seeking Jesus make next week and the events that follow mean a little bit more? Amen.